
Review

ANTHONY KALDELLIS, *Le discours ethnographique à Byzance: Continuité et rupture*. (Séminaires byzantins 2.) Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2013. Paper. Pp. 247. €45. ISBN: 978-2-251-44454-3.

ANTHONY KALDELLIS, *Ethnography after Antiquity: Foreign Lands and Peoples in Byzantine Literature*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. Pp. x, 275. \$75. ISBN: 978-0-8122-4531-8.

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2 These two books are essentially the same. Both draw on the same body of research,
 3 displaying an extremely broad and impressive knowledge of Greek literature of the period
 4 c.500–c.1500. Both are cogently argued and the thesis that they present is well developed.
 5 The French volume remains faithful to the original lectures as they were delivered in Paris,
 6 whereas the English volume has additional material and bibliography, notably relating
 7 to the Palaiologan period, and the argument is reoriented by a reordering of themes.
 8 Careful attention is paid to secondary literature throughout, and the latest insights are often
 9 privileged over older works, for the author is clear that the study of Byzantine literature is
 10 only now maturing. However, the foundation of the study is a profound appreciation of
 11 Byzantine texts, notably the full run of historiography, which the author has read closely,
 12 and on much of which he has written before, whether in monographs (Prokopios, Psellos),
 13 translations into English (Prokopios and Psellos again, plus Genesios and Attaleiates),
 14 or learned articles (the aforementioned, but also Agathias, Lydos, Skylitzes, and more).
 15 Among the author’s major points, I highlight three of especial importance: that there
 16 was a clear break between the writing of late antique and middle Byzantine history; that
 17 the Byzantines had no ecumenical world view, which could translate into a notion like the
 18 “commonwealth”; and that the idea that Byzantine literature offers the reader a “distorting
 19 mirror” is itself a distortion, reflected through a modern, not medieval, prism.

20 Rather than review the material twice, I shall offer an overview of the French lectures,
 21 since these are less accessible to readers of *Speculum*. After a concise and articulate intro-
 22 duction, labeled chapter 1, the author’s second chapter considers the key writers of late
 23 antique ethnography, which is to be found embedded in Greek historiography. Examples
 24 are drawn from Prokopios, Agathias, and Theophylaktos. The third chapter develops this
 25 line, focusing on “subversion.” It begins with a long quotation from Priskos, on which in-
 26 sightful commentary is offered, before turning back to Prokopios and Agathias, to explore
 27 the *politeia*. This is stated to be the most significant concept in later Roman and Byzantine
 28 political thought, and a fuller monographic treatment of it is promised (now forthcoming
 29 with Harvard University Press). Prokopios’s ethnographic digression on the *Ephthalitai*
 30 is examined in detail, and his positive remarks on this barbarian *politeia* are shown to be
 31 negative commentary on the bloodstained politics of Justinian. Similar insights are offered
 32 on Agathias’s consideration of the Franks. The idea that ethnographic commentary is more
 33 about the Romans than the barbarians is far from novel, of course, but here the idea is
 34 applied with nuance to texts that the author has mastered.

35 The fourth chapter turns to Byzantine writers, positing that the writing of ethnogra-
 36 phy declined severely after the sixth century, until it reappeared in the fourteenth. (The
 37 fourteenth-century material is examined more fully in the English volume.) This was not,
 38 we are shown, due to absence of information, and a number of passages concerning spies,
 39 diplomats, and former prisoners or hostages are examined. Secret archives, now lost, are

40 posited, and military treatises introduced. Chapter 5 catalogues opportunities deliberately
 41 missed—notably when engaged in diplomatic activity or the cognate activity of converting
 42 Slavs—by Byzantine writers to engage in ethnographic enquiry. Chapter 6 concerns two
 43 works, the *Taktika* of Leon VI and the *De administrando imperio*, which was produced
 44 by or for Leon’s son, Constantine VII. Both texts are shown to conform to established
 45 Byzantine types rather than to offer ethnographic information per se.

46 Chapter 7 is concerned with middle Byzantine historiography, offering a survey of works
 47 that do not trouble with ethnographic digressions. As the author notes, this is not especially
 48 perplexing before the twelfth century, when chronicles dominate the scene, but demands
 49 fuller consideration as historians became self-consciously classicizing. Sketches signal, al-
 50 though none proves (given the limited space allocated to each), that each historian had
 51 his—or in one case her—own goals, which were largely incompatible with ethnography,
 52 or in the context of which indulging in ethnographic digression was unnecessary. Psellos,
 53 Niketas Choniates, and Attaleiates are wisely singled out for fuller attention. Chapter 8,
 54 a companion piece, explores those few passages in middle Byzantine historiography that
 55 might be interpreted as ethnographic. In fact, it is shown, they set out the geo-strategic
 56 background to events covered in narrative histories, and are therefore of a type with the *De*
 57 *administrando imperio*. In this regard, the author is arguing for the existence of dossiers
 58 of such information in imperial archives, which makes a good deal of sense. An excursus
 59 on the origins and migrations of Kuvrat’s Bulgars, as reported by Theophanes—the type
 60 of origin myth beloved of recent students of “ethnogenesis”—is among the earliest of such
 61 reports, and that in Skylitzes on the Seljuks is a crucial and original means to date his
 62 work to the later 1080s or 1090s (as C. Holmes has argued quite recently on compatible
 63 grounds). The notable exception that proves the rule is identified as the description of
 64 the defeated Rus’ and their leader Sviatoslav in 971, which is incorporated into Leo the
 65 Deacon’s *History*, but which the author shows to be the work of a classicizing author in
 66 praise of the emperor John Tzimiskes.

67 Chapter 9 begins with an extremely lively series of reflections on language, notably
 68 the use of literary language, which debunks the thesis that Byzantine literature acts as a
 69 “distorting mirror.” The use of classical ethnonyms, most of which were late antique, is
 70 accompanied by contemporary glosses, such that the meaning is rarely unclear. Moreover,
 71 such naming was also taming, projecting claims over lands that the Romans had always
 72 held, but which were now occupied by the latest variant of barbarian, where once dwelt
 73 Skythians or Celts. Chapter 10 concerns the nomadic Pechenegs, one brand of Skythian,
 74 some of whose leaders were converted, but who as Christians never became anything more
 75 than barbarians. The Pecheneg conversion was, in any case, a matter of politics rather
 76 than conviction, and its representations were subject to the usual rules that governed
 77 literature, whether panegyric or history. The case study in chapter 11 is the Bulgarians and
 78 their leaders. Theodore Daphnopates, acting both as epistolographical scold and oratorical
 79 apologist, knows that the “half-Greek” Tsar Symeon, still less his son Peter, could not be
 80 wholly Roman. Archbishop Theophylaktos, who lived among the Bulgarians at Ohrid,
 81 would regard them as only half civilized two centuries after their conversion, and a half
 82 century after their lands had been annexed by Basil II in 1018. Certainly, the author shows
 83 that the rhetoric of Christian ecumenism is harder to find than examples disparaging non-
 84 Romans, but one wonders whether his emphasis is not skewed too far in one direction,
 85 accumulating data in the manner he observes elsewhere to be dangerous. That is to say,
 86 each text or oration was serving its own purpose on the occasion it was written or delivered,
 87 not revealing a universal truth about Romans and barbarians, nor how all Romans felt
 88 about all non-Romans at all times.

89 Chapter 12 seems somewhat less refined than much that has gone before, dissolving at
 90 times into a procession of quotations from others, notably from some very recent books.

91 The basic argument, that Christian Romans were as chauvinistic as any other type of
92 Roman, is unexceptionable, and few would now wish to argue that the Christianization of
93 the Roman Empire did not entail, to a very large degree, the Romanization of Christianity.
94 The argument, presented as novel (and in its formulation sophisticated) would appear to
95 be analogous to two very well-established controversies: the idea that imperial Christianity
96 corrupted an allegedly pure pre-Constantinian Church, over which theologically inclined
97 historians have argued for more than a century; and the notion that brands of Christianity
98 were ethnic designators, for example that Arianism was a “barbarian” form of Christianity,
99 embraced by “Germanic tribes.” The final chapter begins with a very user-friendly summary
100 of some, but not all, of the author’s principal findings. One might quibble at the ordering
101 of the points, which appears to reflect neither their perceived importance nor the order
102 in which they were made. The ensuing narrative is more denouement than conclusion,
103 introducing Islam as the “elephant in the room” that has thus far capably evaded our
104 gaze; had we been looking in a “distorting mirror”? The author succeeds in tying the
105 various strands together very capably around this new theme, but it requires sleight of
106 hand. The introduction of Islam far earlier in the English version allows for its more
107 successful integration into the argument and therefore represents one of the best aspects of
108 the reworking. Both works deserve to be read carefully.

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